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The Transmission of Alliterative Poetry: Scribal Practice in the A Text of William Langland's *Piers Plowman*[1]

Abstract
The extant manuscripts of William Langland's *Piers Plowman* are rich in scribal variation, with the scribes even going as far as to change words in alliterating position. This paper analyzes the variants collected in the critical apparatus of Kane's (1988) edition of the A text in order to find out how frequently the scribes reduced alliteration in a line. It seems that some variants were introduced at such an early stage that they were passed down in the text tradition. Moreover, while it is certainly not possible to tell why exactly a scribe introduced a certain variant, there are certain patterns among the non-alliterating variants. I will, therefore, also address possible reasons for the introduction of variants that reduce alliteration, such as mechanical errors, substitutions for difficult words or semantically related words.

1. Introduction

William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, a poem of the so-called alliterative revival, has survived in more than 50 manuscripts. These differ greatly in their language and even a quick look at the variants of collated manuscripts in any of the modern editions of *Piers Plowman* (e.g. Kane 1988a; Knott-Fowler 1969) reveals that editors have to cope with a vast number of variants. According to Kane, the critical apparatus of *Piers Plowman* is so large because of three main reasons: first, Kane (1988a: 115) notes that the text "was especially subject to variation as a living text with a content of direct concern to its scribes", i.e., the content, which refers to contemporary events, might have distracted the scribes in the process of copying. Second, Kane continues that these scribes might have disregarded formality needs when copying the text because, as opposed to other Middle English poems, *Piers Plowman* was written in "non-stanzaic, unrhymed lines with an indeterminate number of syllables" (1988a: 115). This had the effect that scribes who were not familiar, or at least not entirely familiar, with the tradition of alliterative poetry might have misinterpreted the apparently liberal form of the text (e.g. no rhymes) as a complete absence of any formal requirements. Finally, Kane adds that the scribes knew that the poem existed in several versions and, therefore, they might have lost their respect from the text when they were copying. However, it seems hard to believe that a scribe would not have noticed alliteration as an integral part of the composition of *Piers Plowman*. A counter example is given by Benskin and Laing (1981: 70), who note that some scribes who otherwise translate a text into their own language do preserve words in alliterative positions. They refer for

[1] This is a revised version of a paper, based on my unpublished *Lizentiat* thesis (equivalent to M.A. thesis) (Joho 2006), which was discussed at the *Studientag zum Englischen Mittelalter* in Berlin in 2009. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer, my *Lizentiat* supervisor Andreas H. Jucker and all the SEM participants for their helpful comments and suggestions.

instance to MS *Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce 104,* which contains a copy of the C text and whose scribe always spells *church* with <k> if the alliteration pattern demands it.

This raises the following question: do the many variants that are recorded in Kane (1988a) occur in non-alliterating positions only or do they also reduce or increase alliteration? There is no doubt that scribes both consciously and subconsciously altered their text and that occasionally this also affected alliteration (cf. Kane 1988a: chapter IV), but it is not clear how frequently the individual scribes changed alliterating words, whether this practice was restricted to the scribes of a few manuscripts only and whether some changes were introduced so early that they were passed down in the textual tradition. After a short introduction to alliteration in *Piers Plowman* in Section 2, I will discuss the aforementioned questions, based on my analysis of the manuscripts of the A text in Section 3. Finally, while it is certainly not feasible from a modern perspective to tell why exactly a medieval scribe introduced a certain variant, in Section 4, I will provide possible explanations for the variants that reduce alliteration in a line.

My analysis of the manuscripts is based on the critical apparatus of the Athlone edition of the A text (Kane 1988a) with seventeen collated manuscripts, which is based on MS *Trinity College Cambridge R.3.14* (T). For several reasons, I restrict my work to the manuscripts of the A text[2]. In contrast to the more than 7,000 lines of the B and C text, the A text consists of only 2,500 lines, divided in twelve passus. The present study includes the data from six passus, which is a relatively large proportion of the part that makes up the A text. Furthermore, I expect the manuscripts of the A text to be linguistically more diverse than the B and C text for two reasons: first, the A text is regarded as the oldest of the three main versions of the text, but the extant manuscripts of the A text are generally younger than those of the B and C text (cf. Doyle 1986: 36), so their manuscript transmission had already lasted longer.[3] Second, the surviving manuscripts of the A text are more heterogeneous regarding their dialectal provenance than those of the B and C text. While the language of the manuscripts of the C text are localized to the South-West Midlands and those of the B text to London and East Anglia, the manuscripts of the A text are more widely spread (Samuels 1988: 207).

2. Alliteration in Piers Plowman

Although the poems of the alliterative revival differ from each other substantially concerning their style and subjects, Turville-Petre (1977: 27) speaks of them

[2] A thorough account of the manuscripts of the A text can be found in Kane (1988a: chapter I). Full reference to the 17 manuscripts, which are henceforth only referred to by their sigla, is given in Appendix I. The following order is adopted from Kane (1988a): TRUDChH[2]VHJLEAKWNMH[3].

[3] On the dating of the three versions cf. Kane (1988b: 184-185).

coming from a 'school' of poets: the poems are linked through the same basic metrical form, through likeness in diction and through similar alliterative phrases and similar syntax. In spite of these parallels, Turville-Petre explains that *Piers Plowman* "represents a departure from the practices of the alliterative tradition" (1977: 31). He argues that, in order to attract a larger audience, Langland used a more informal style compared to that of other authors of the alliterative revival and he refrained from using the amount of alliterative vocabulary that was generally used in alliterative poems of the period. The large number of manuscripts, which were widely distributed and must have been read or heard by many people, supports Turville-Petre's line of argumentation. Therefore, in contrast to the 'high style' of *Sir Gawain*, the alliterative style of *Piers Plowman* and of other poems in its tradition is referred to as 'plain style' (Turville-Petre 1977: 59) or as 'informal' as opposed to 'formal' (Lawton 1982: 2). There are, for instance, fewer alliterating syllables per line and fewer half-lines with three alliterating syllables in *Piers Plowman* than there are in earlier poems of the alliterative revival. Oakden (1968: 171) states that only 9% of all lines in *Piers Plowman* – as opposed to 15.3% of the lines in *Sir Gawain* – are extended to three or more alliterating syllables per half-line. Furthermore, in some lines in *Piers Plowman* there is no alliteration at all, which Turville-Petre identifies as scribal corruption (1977: 59), a view shared by Kane (1988a) and Kane and Donaldson (1988).

Since *Piers Plowman* does not share all the typical features of other poems of the alliterative revival, theories on Langland's alliterative style are highly disputed. Beckwith (1981) provides a good overview of the traditional theories about Langland's meter and concludes that there are "two schools" of scholars: one represented by Skeat (1885) and the other represented by Kane and Donaldson (1988). One of the main differences between them concerns the question of whether alliteration on prepositions and weakly stressed words should be counted or not. Kane and Donaldson (1988) conclude that there are too many lines in which alliteration falls on function words to dismiss them as accidental. Their view is supported by Turville-Petre (1977: 59), who comments, however, that the emphasis of a line is clearly reduced through these words, especially when they fall on the important third stress, whose alliterative letter was called 'chief-letter' by Skeat (1885).

A further difference between the theories proposed by Skeat (1885) and Kane and Donaldson (1988) concerns the sounds which alliterate in Langland's own system. In general, Kane and Donaldson propose the following regular alliteration patterns as typical of Langland: "Exact alliteration of single consonant sounds or consonant groups; or of a single consonant sound with that of the first element of a consonant group; vocalic alliteration; and alliteration of a vowel with an aspirated vowel" (1988: 132). Unlike Skeat, they regard the practice of alliterating [s] with [ʃ] and [f] with [v] as authorial (1988: 132–133), but, like Skeat, they reject alliteration of voiced and voiceless stops ([b] / [p] and [g] / [k]), while Knott and Fowler (1969: 17) present this as a typical feature of Langland's style of alliteration. While [s] and

[ʃ] are probably only approximate staves or "alliteration for the eye", as Oakden (1968: 177) puts it, [f] and [v] may well have been exact alliteration in Langland's dialect (Kane and Donaldson 1988: 133).

With regard to alliteration patterns, it is generally accepted that a line of the type aa/ax as in example (1) is the most common one (e.g. Kane and Donaldson 1988; Lawton 1988), but the figures vary depending on the theory applied by the respective scholars.

(1) a a a x
W*orching & **w**andringe as þe **w**orld askiþ.* (Prol. 19)

Sapora (1977: 60) reports that of the 1,007 lines that he scanned from the A text 71.3% are of the type aa/ax, whereas Oakden (1968: 186) indicates only 65.2%. Since Kane and Donaldson accept alliteration on function words, I assume that their figure would be higher than Sapora's and Oakden's. With regard to other patterns, Kane and Donaldson explain lines with four or five alliterating sounds either as accidental due to the vocabulary used or else as "possibly intended for some special effect" (1988: 136). Furthermore, they consider lines with the pattern aa/xy, ax/ay, xa/ay, aa/bb, ab/ab to be clearly scribal rather than authorial, unless they contain Latin elements. Finally, they also treat lines with aa/xa alliteration as scribal, because in such a line the important 'chief-letter' does not carry alliteration.

In this paper, I follow Kane and Donaldson's (1988) approach to alliteration in *Piers Plowman* when determining whether or not a line shows reduced alliteration. I am aware of the fact that Kane and Donaldson disregard a closer connection between alliteration and rhythm and that Duggan (1987) and, more recently, Inoue (2004) have shown convincingly that alliteration is connected with Langland's system of rhythm. However, I will not pay special attention to rhythm in this paper, for the following two reasons: first, I am mainly interested in whether the three-stave alliterative line typical of Langland's *Piers Plowman* has been preserved by the scribes and, second, it would exceed the limits of this paper to include also an analysis of rhythm.

3. Frequency of Lines with Reduced Alliteration

3.1 Method

In order to find out how scribes treated alliteration when copying a manuscript, I analyzed six of the twelve passus from *Piers Plowman.* For several reasons, this included the Prologue, I, II, VI, VII and VIII. First of all, it would not have been possible to take just the first six passus, as there would have been virtually no data from H^3 (cf. Appendix I). Equally, I could not only analyze the second half of the A text, because manuscripts HLEN break off somewhere between VII 213 and the end of VIII. Even with the passages I chose, it was not possible to have an equal number of lines from each manuscript; nevertheless, I was able to obtain a

substantial amount of data from each manuscript so that all manuscripts of the A text could be included in the present study.

The second reason for choosing the said passus was that, by analysing passages from the beginning and from a later part of the text, I achieved a more accurate analysis of the variants. When McIntosh (1973: 61) describes the habits of medieval scribes copying a text with a dialect different from their own, he explains that scribes hardly ever left the text of a manuscript without any alterations (type A). More often than not, they changed it to their own dialects (type B) or they did something in between – sometimes changing a word and sometimes not (type C). Benskin and Laing add a further aspect to McIntosh's model:

> a single scribe need not be bound to any *one* of these treatments over the whole course of a single text or collection of texts: although at any given point of text his treatment is describable as one and only one of these three types, a copyist may shift from one type of treatment to another, and 'translational drift' from type C to type B is in fact very common. (1981: 56, emphasis in the original)

Benskin and Laing explain that whenever scribes started to copy a text with an unfamiliar language or dialect, they faithfully copied it word for word without making changes. However, as they became more and more acquainted with the text which they were copying from, they started to convert the text into their own language or dialect. Benskin and Laing refer to such texts as "progressively translated" (1981: 66). When comparing this to the process of copying alliterative lines, I also had to assume that some scribes transcribed the alliterating words more carefully in the beginning and changed their habit in the process of copying. Because of these changing practices, Benskin and Laing suggest that a scribal text that is too large to be analyzed completely ought to be divided into sections of "manageable size but representing nevertheless a significant sample" (1981: 62). They suggest a section from the beginning, one from the middle and one from the end. However, as the end of the A text in the various manuscripts is very diverse (cf. Appendix I), it was not possible for me to proceed as they propose. Nevertheless, I believe that, by analyzing a substantial section from the beginning and one from the middle (or end of HLEN), there was enough data to analyze how scribes treated alliterative lines in the process of copying.

3.1.1. Lines Counted

The six sections of the A text analyzed in this paper make up a little less than half of the entire text, i.e. about 1,000 of the roughly 2,500 lines of the A text. Because of the differences between the manuscripts, it is essential to state according to which guidelines the lines were counted in order to arrive at the total number of lines in a given manuscript (cf. Table 1). First, I subtracted those lines from the total number which, according to the critical apparatus in Kane (1988a), are omitted in a

manuscript. Furthermore, I did not count full lines in Latin or lines containing some Latin with only two staves, as this is the exception Kane and Donaldson (1988: 137) mention for an authorial line with only two alliterating sounds. Moreover, I did not count lines VII 57–285 for H^2, because the manuscript is defective in this part. Although the text occasionally resumes within this passage, there are no reliable variants and, therefore, I did not count these lines at all. An additional peculiarity of H^2 has to be mentioned: this manuscript is full of alterations in a mid-sixteenth-century hand (Kane 1988a: 7). If for any manuscript a variant is given by a later corrector, I only counted the original reading.

After subtracting all the lines as just described, I reached the total numbers as presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Total number of lines analyzed in each manuscript.

	A	**Ch**	**D**	**E**	**H**	**H^2**	**H^3**	**J**	**K**
Prol. – I	113	488	491	477	478	490	0	476	468
VI – VIII	467	592	577	293	473	373	528	593	517
Total	580	1,080	1,068	770	951	863	528	1,069	985

	L	**M**	**N**	**R**	**T**	**U**	**V**	**W**
Prol. – I	483	478	275	485	490	418	455	483
VI – VIII	547	590	585	577	594	527	589	588
Total	1,030	1,068	860	1,062	1,084	945	1,044	1,071

For A and H^3, only half as many lines were analyzed compared to most other manuscripts. The passages from H^2EN were also considerably shorter than the passages from other manuscripts. However, as explained above, it was not possible to find longer passages in which all manuscripts contain the same amount of text and I refrained from analyzing additional lines for these manuscripts, because the results would not be comparable to those of the other manuscripts, as the variants would come from a different section.

3.1.2 Variants Counted

In order to find out to what extent scribes reduced alliteration in a line, I counted as defective those lines in each manuscript in which there were only two staves due to scribal variation. This meant, on the one hand, that I only counted a variant if the three stave alliteration pattern was clearly lost in a line. For instance, if a scribe altered more than one stave but alliteration was still preserved, I did not count this line as defective, because even though it is very likely that such variants are scribal,

it could not be ruled out that they might be relicts from an earlier manuscript or even authorial. If the variant was already present in an ancestor of the most recent manuscript the scribe could not have recognized that the variant was not the original alliterating term.

On the other hand, I did not count those lines with excessive alliteration (such as aa/aa, aaa/aa or aaa/ax) in which the alliteration of three staves was preserved in a manuscript. This happened, for instance, in the very first line of the Prologue:

(2) *IN a somer sesoun whanne softe was the sonne* (Prol. 1)
softe … sonne] *I south wente* RUE.

The alliteration in such lines was not entirely lost and, therefore, I did not count such variants. However, if a line of the pattern aa/aa had been altered to a line of the pattern aa/xa as in example (3), in which the important chief letter was lost, I still counted the variant as reducing alliteration:

(3) *þoruȝ flood* [*and*] *foule wed*er*is fruytes shuln fa*[*i*]*lle,* (VII 306)
flood] *tempestes* U. *fruytes*] *cornes* R. *faille*] *be dystroyid* H^3.

In each of these three manuscripts there are still three alliterating staves, all of which fall on a stressed syllable. In U there is the pattern xa/aa, in R aa/xa and in H^3 aa/ax. While in H^3 I found a regular line which could be authorial, U caused more problems, since there is no alliteration on the first stressed syllable. However, Kane and Donaldson (1988: 138) state in a footnote that such a line is possibly authorial. Therefore, I did not count such a line as being reduced, especially since alliteration connects the first half-line with the second half-line. But the pattern found in R has been shown to be purely scribal by Kane and Donaldson (1988: 139) and already Skeat (1885) stresses the importance of this 'chief-letter' in a line. Therefore, I counted a line with a non-alliterating variant on the third stave as being reduced.

3.2 Results [4]

Lines with reduced alliteration could be found in all 17 manuscripts of the A text, but the extent to which alliteration was reduced varied greatly from manuscript to manuscript. Table 2 shows the number of lines with reduced alliteration per manuscript:

[4] The complete corpus of variants is listed in appendix III of Joho (2006).

Table 2. Total number of lines with reduced alliteration.

	A	Ch	D	E	H	H^2	H^3	J	K
Lines analyzed	580	1,080	1,068	770	951	863	528	1,069	985
Reduced alliteration	75	53	57	95	113	32	44	66	33

	L	M	N	R	T	U	V	W
Lines analyzed	1,030	1,068	860	1,062	1,084	945	1,044	1,071
Reduced alliteration	47	139	31	92	34	82	77	100

Already the absolute figures reveal that M contains by far the most lines with reduced alliteration and that, at the other end of the scale, there are TH^2KN with less than 35 lines each. However, as mentioned above, not all manuscripts contain the same amount of text (cf. Appendix I) and, therefore, the number of lines in which alliteration is reduced is also presented in percentages in Figure 1. The figures are rounded to one digit after the comma and the manuscripts are presented in descending order of frequency:

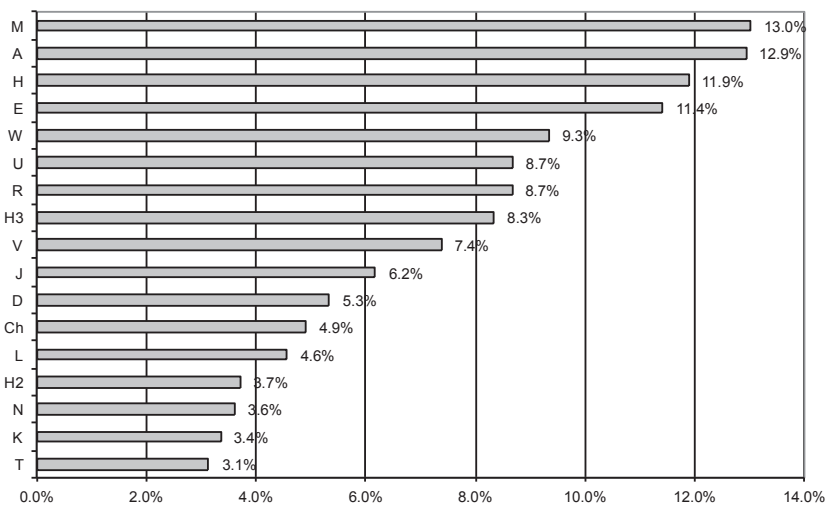


Figure 1. Frequency of lines with reduced alliteration.

Figure 1 illustrates that M and A are the manuscripts with the most lines with reduced alliteration, with A showing a slightly smaller percentage of reduced

lines. Since M and A are possibly genetically related (Kane 1988a: 113), a similar frequency is expected.[5] Another manuscript related to the group AM from the Prologue to Passus VII, E, shows a high number of lines with reduced alliteration, too. However, a closer look at the variants reveals that the figures might be purely coincidental as these three manuscripts do not always show exactly the same variants. Also Figure 2, which illustrates the percentages for each passus, shows that the columns for EAM do not even resemble one another. Furthermore, according to Kane (1988a: 113), H^3 is also genetically related to the group from the Prologue to Passus VII, but the figures for this manuscript are much lower and do not correlate with the rest of EAM at all.

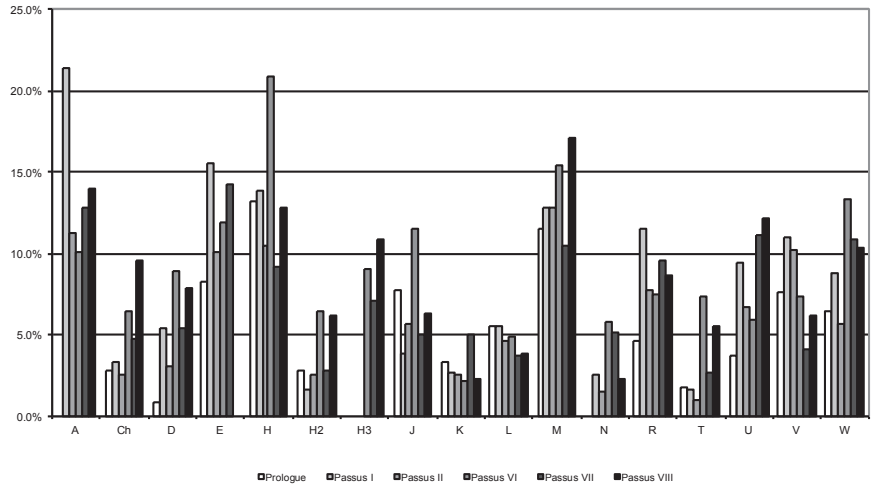


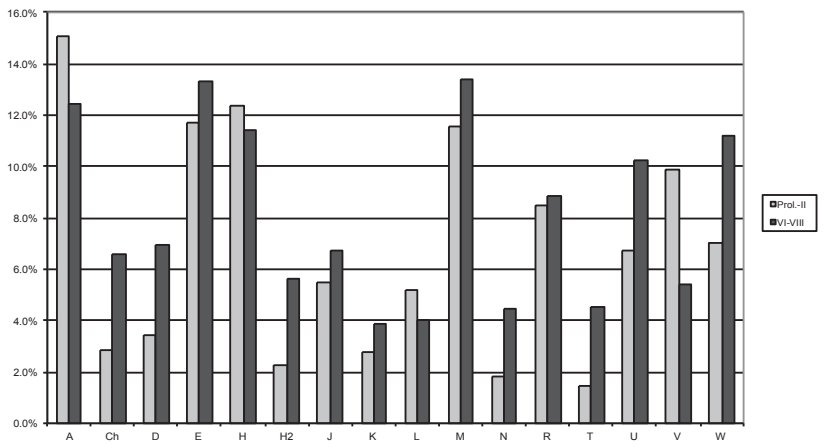
Figure 2. Frequency of lines with reduced alliteration for each passus.

EAM is not the only group of related manuscripts with similar frequencies: all manuscripts of the group TH^2ChD contain rather low numbers of lines with reduced alliteration and the pair RU even shares the same percentage of reduced lines. Again, this might be a coincidence, but quite frequently the variants of TH^2ChD agree and Figure 2 shows very similar columns for these manuscripts. The variants in R and U, however, coincide quite infrequently, although these manuscripts are also reported to be genetically related. I argue, therefore, that a common ancestor of TH^2ChD already contained lines with reduced alliteration, while the common ancestor of RU did not include as many variants that reduce alliteration as Figure 1 suggests.

[5] For a discussion of the possible genetic relationship of the manuscripts cf. Kane (1988a: 113) and Knott and Fowler (1969).

Knott and Fowler (1969: 26) and Kane (1988a: 113) also mention the genetic pairs VH and WN, but the figures for these manuscripts deviate highly from one another. On the one hand, 11.9% of lines in H have reduced alliteration, whereas only 7.4% of those in V do. The difference between W and N is even greater. Compared to the 9.3% of reduced lines in W, the 3.6% in N is such a small number that certainly some of the variants in W, but also in H above, were introduced by the individual scribes and could not have existed in a common ancestor of WN and VH, respectively.

As mentioned in section 3.1, it is necessary to analyze the two passages separately because some scribes tended to change their habit of copying during the process (cf. Figure 3). Such a comparison is not possible for H^3, because the A text of that manuscript only starts at V 106. Furthermore, one must bear in mind that the number of lines analyzed for A and N is rather small in the first part. From N there are only 275 lines because N is defective at the beginning (Kane 1988a: 12) and A contains even fewer lines from the beginning, as Prologue–I 141, II 18–145 and III 114–229 are missing (Kane 1988a: 1). Therefore, one has to bear in mind that the data for N and especially for A are not as reliable as the data from the other manuscripts.



	A	Ch	D	E	H	H^2	J	K	L	M	N	R	T	U	V	W
Prol.–II	15.0%	2.9%	3.5%	11.7%	12.3%	2.2%	5.5%	2.8%	5.2%	11.5%	1.8%	8.5%	1.4%	6.7%	9.9%	7.0%
VI–VIII	12.4%	6.6%	6.9%	13.3%	11.4%	5.6%	6.7%	3.9%	4.0%	13.4%	4.4%	8.8%	4.5%	10.2%	5.4%	11.2%

Figure 3. Comparison of the frequency of lines with reduced alliteration in the two parts of the A text.

Figure 3 presents a comparison of the two separate parts and it is striking that there are only two manuscripts, namely R and H, in which hardly any difference in scribal practice is noticeable from the first to the second part. However, the case of H needs some explanation: a look at Figure 2 above reveals that in Passus VI the percentage for H deviates quite strongly from the percentages for the other passus of the same manuscript. A possible reason for this deviation is a missing leaf that contains the passage VI 49–VII 2. Manuscript H^3, for instance, a manuscript with the same number of reduced lines as H in Passus VI, contains roughly the same number of variants up to the missing text of H, but there are no variants causing reduced alliteration in H^3 after VI 52. Therefore, it could well be that the figure of H in Passus VI would not be as high if the whole text were available. The figures for passus VII and VIII in Figure 2 show that the frequency of reduced lines remains roughly at the same high level as in the first part and, therefore, I argue that the scribe of H did not change scribal practice during the process of copying.

Manuscript H is not the only manuscript in which this problem of a much higher number of reduced lines in a single passus occurs. Figure 2 shows that in A the first passus contains a markedly higher number than the other passus of the same manuscript. Again, there are only 42 lines in A which can be counted and, therefore, the percentage may be misleading. However, a comparison of the percentage of reduced alliteration for Passus II from A and the genetically related E reveals that there is indeed a much higher number of reduced lines in these manuscripts in the said passus and, therefore, I conclude that the variants already occurred in a common ancestor of E and A, because M does not show this deviating figure. Kane (1988a) does not confirm this close relationship between E and A, but Knott and Fowler (1969: 26) show this relationship in their attempt to draw a genealogical tree of the manuscripts of the A text. Because the figures for E and A are so high in general, the difference in percentages from the first part to the second part is too small to draw any conclusions on the copying strategies of their scribes and the same applies to manuscripts RHJLKM.

The difference in figures is greater for manuscripts TUDChH^2VWN; however, the increase (or decrease in the case of V) is not significant for manuscripts U and N, as Table 3 shows:

Table 3. Absolute number of lines with reduced alliteration in the two separate sections in manuscripts TUDChH²VWN.

	Prol. – I		VI – VIII			
	Total	**Reduced**	**Total**	**Reduced**	χ^2	**P**
Ch	488	14	592	39	7.539	**0.0060**
D	491	17	577	40	5.985	**0.0144**
H^2	490	11	373	21	6.545	**0.0105**
N	275	5	585	26	3.579	0.0585
T	490	7	594	27	8.317	**0.0039**
U	418	28	527	54	3.382	0.0659
V	455	45	589	32	6.914	**0.0086**
W	483	34	588	66	4.974	**0.0257**

Because TDChH² should be treated separately, as they form a group with a common ancestor, I start with a discussion of manuscripts UVWN. While there is a drop in the number of variants in the first part compared to the variants of the second part in V, the number of variants rises in the other manuscripts. The fact that the figures for U differ greatly from those of the related R (cf. Figure 3) is further support for the claim that the equal percentage of variants in total for R and U is purely coincidental and that the variants in R and U must be scribal and only partly transmitted from a common ancestor. In W and N, an increase of variants is also visible: I already argued above that the variants in W are probably scribal because the number is much higher than the one from the related manuscript N and the figures from both separate parts confirm this claim.

As already stated above, all manuscripts from the group TDChH² show a significant increase in the number of lines with reduced alliteration from the first part to the second part. It is again striking that the figures for TDChH² are so similar, even if one considers the respective figures for the first and the second part separately. These figures further suggest that the scribes of TDChH² probably did not make many changes to their copies and that the lines with reduced alliteration might well have already been present in an ancestor of these manuscripts.

To sum up, my analysis has shown that there are, indeed, changes in the process of copying in some manuscripts; however, very often it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to tell whether the reduction had already taken place in an ancestor of the extant manuscripts or whether the variants were caused by the most recent scribes.

4. Reasons for Variants that Reduce Alliteration

My analysis of the variants in the Prologue and Passus VI has revealed that the variants that reduce alliteration can mostly be grouped into the following three categories: mechanical errors, variants for words causing difficulties, and semantically related variants.[6] Kane (1988a: 115–146) provides a discussion of the entire corpus of variants of the A text and the symbol ‡ following any of my examples indicates that the variant is also explained the same way by Kane.

Kane defines mechanical errors as those variants "where the scribe, at the moment of writing, was unaware of his departure from copy and would presumably have admitted the mistake if shown it" (1988a: 117). I find this definition rather problematic, as we cannot definitively tell in retrospect whether a medieval scribe would have admitted a copying mistake or not. Kane continues that the main reasons for mechanical errors are "inattention through fatigue, momentary external distractions, or internal distractions of memory or verbal association" (1988a: 117) and this refinement is more helpful. The results of such inattentions are words or lines which are omitted (example 4), letters which are confused (example 5) and variants which are triggered by words already copied (example 6) or which are triggered by anticipation (example 7):

(4) *Ac be war þanne of wraþþe, þat wykkide shrewe,*[7] (VI 95)
wykkide] om VJAW.

(5) *I saiȝ a tour on a toft triȝely Imakid;* (Prol. 14) ‡
toft] *cost* (? *coft* or even *toft*) E; *coste* R.

(6) *He bar a burdoun ybounde wiþ a brood list*,
In a [*weþewindes*] *wyse* [*ywounden*] *aboute;* (VI 5 and 6)
ywounden] *Ibounden* M; *bounden* D; *he bond hym* TH^2.

(7) *Seriauntis it semide þat seruide at þe barre*;
Pleten for penis & [*poundide*] *þe lawe,* (Prol. 85 and 86)
*s*er*uide*] *pletede* R; *pletiden* U.

These mechanical errors are comparably frequent and I agree with Kane that the scribes were probably unaware of their departure from the original, as the output of

[6] A detailed list and discussion of all the variants in the Prologue and Passus VI is provided in Joho (2006).

[7] In order to include the immediate context for the variants under discussion in this section, I also provide the relevant lines of the Athlone edition (Kane 1988a). However, I would like to point out that in order to determine, whether a variant caused the reduction of alliteration, I considered the entire line of a given manuscript and did not simply compare it to the highly edited Athlone text.

mechanical errors is very often not coherent with the rest of the line or the text and, therefore, most likely not intended. Furthermore, a line may still be coherent after the omission of words or phrases, but then it is very often due to the fact that the missing part is a modifying adjective, adverb or other defining phrase.

While it is very likely that such errors as presented in examples (4)–(7) are unconscious slips in the process of copying, it is difficult to tell whether this is also the case for examples (8) and (9):

(8) *Þanne gan I mete a merueillous sweuene,* (Prol. 11) ‡
merueillous] *nerwelous* R.

(9) *Grete lobbies & longe þat loþ were to swynke* (Prol. 52)
lobies] *polys* J.

Kane (1988a: 117) refers to such variants as “simple aberrations”, and lists them also as mechanical errors. These are for instance words which are not attested elsewhere (example 8) or words which are attested, but do not fit the context of the line (example 9). It is possible that a misreading of a minim is responsible for ME *nerwelous* R (Prol. 11). The word is not attested in the *OED* or *MED*, and also a noun ME **nerwel*, from which ME *nerwelous* might be derived, cannot be found in either dictionary. Furthermore, F *nerval* or L *nervalis* > ModE *nerval* is rather unlikely as it translates to “A medicinal ointment for the sinews” (*OED*: **nerval** *n.*), which is something entirely different from the original word. Also in the second example a confusion of letters could be the reason for the variant, but in this case the word is actually attested elsewhere. While ME *loby, -ie* is “A lazy hulking fellow; a lout; an awkward, stupid, clownish person.” (*OED*: **looby**, *n.*), L *polium*, *polion* > ME *poly, poley* denotes a special herb of Southern Europe (*OED*: **poly,** *n.*[1]). However, although the word exists, it does not fit the context of the line and is therefore classified as aberration.

Difficult words with which scribes may have had problems are a further reason for variants reducing alliteration. Kane (1988a: 132) notes that scribes sometimes failed to copy a word faithfully if they did not fully understand it and Hussey (1969: 6) also mentions that, quite often, scribes changed their text to make it “more intelligible” or “more explicit”. Black (1998) analyzed a scribal translation of the C text and also found many examples of variants that were introduced because the original word may have been unfamiliar to the scribe. These included archaic or dialectal words or words of Scandinavian or French origin. Black even mentions that this often reduced alliteration in a line. The variants which were changed for simplification are mostly words which, based on their entry in the *OED*, are not well attested in the Middle English period or are limited to certain varieties. The group comprises special alliterative vocabulary (example 10), archaic

words (example 11), newly introduced words, e.g. from Anglo-Norman or French (example 12) or dialectal words (example 13):

(10) *Canst þou wisse vs þe wey where þat wy dwelliþ?* (VI 21)
wy] *man* M; *he* HJW.

(11) *For no likerous liflode here likam to plese* (Prol. 30) ‡
likam] *body* M.

(12) *He is þe presteste payere þat pore men knowen*; (VI 38)
presteste] *rediest* H.

(13) *But holy chirche &* [*hy*] *holden bet togidere* (Prol. 63)
hy] *þei* TRChL; *þai* E.

The quotations in the *OED* entry show that OE *wiȝa* > ME *wy* is not attested between the 10th century and the middle of the 14th century and that after 1340 it is specific to alliterative poetry (*OED*: **wye**, *n.*[1]). For ME *likam* "The body; the living body" (*OED*: **licham**, *n.*) there is textual evidence for the entire Early Middle English period, but it is only rarely attested after the first half of the 15th century. Manuscript M was copied around 1425 (Kane 1988a: 12) and ME *likame* was replaced by the then more common ME *body*. AN/OF *prest* > ME *preste* (*OED*: **prest**, *adj.*), on the other hand, was not known at all before the late 13th century. From the late 14th century onwards it was used in expressions together with ME *redy,* which may have triggered the variant here. Finally, in example (13) it is very likely that the line originally contained the 3rd person plural personal pronoun ME *hy*, which is replaced by a <*th*-> form in manuscripts TRChLE. It is well known that these forms first appeared in the East Midlands and in Northern dialects, but from the 14th century onwards, they were also common in London and in the dialects from the North-Western Midlands (Brunner 1967: §53).

Kane states that "substitutions of easier for more difficult expressions" (1988a: 135) were very common in metrical positions; however, my findings reveal that this group is not very prominent. Very few of the variants are alliterative terms, because *Piers Plowman* is not very rich in special alliterative vocabulary (cf. Turville-Petre 1977: 31) and the same is true for archaic vocabulary (Oakden 1935: 187). Moreover, alterations due to dialectal differences are not very common, either. This must be explained by the fact that morphological dialectal markers do not affect the initial letter of a word and, therefore, alliteration is not reduced. Furthermore, many prominent dialect markers, such as the use of different pronouns or of different forms of the verb ME *be* do not have a great effect on alliteration, because alliteration very rarely falls on function words. However, Chambers (1919) convincingly shows that in some manuscripts pronouns or forms of the verb ME *be* are changed regardless of whether they are in an alliterative position or not. Finally, newer

words or terms which appear in *Piers Plowman* for the first time ever, according to the *OED* extended search, are also rarely replaced in alliterative position. This might be due to the fact that these new words were already well known in spoken language before they appeared in writing for the first time.

Finally, a large group of variants that reduce alliteration is comprised of semantically related words. Mostly, these are synonyms (example 14), but also co-hyponyms (example 15), antonyms (example 16), metonyms (example 17), and semantically more or less marked words (examples 18 and 19):

(14) *Canst þou wisse vs þe wey where þat wy dwelliþ?* (VI 21)
wisse] *teche* H.

(16) *Ac as I beheld into þe Est an heiȝ to þe sonne* (Prol. 13)
Est] *west* Ch.

(17) *Þou miȝt gete grace* [*þere*] *so þou go be tyme*. (VI 123)
go] *come* V.

(18) *Alle þe housis ben helid, hallis & chaumbris*, (VI 77)
housis] *rofeȝ* E.

(19) *Personis & parish prestis pleynide hem to here bisshop* (Prol. 80)
parish prestis] *vicaries* WM.

(20) *As ancris & Ermytes þat holden hem in* [*here*] *cellis*, (Prol. 28)
holden hem] *leven* E.

Both ME *wisse* (*OED*: **wis**, *v.*[1]) and ME *teche* (*OED*: **teach**, *v.*) could mean "to show the way". Interestingly, in the same manuscript, only a few lines later (VI 42), ME *wisse* is replaced once more by ME *teche*. In addition to synonyms, there are variants which are semantically related but do not mean the same. There are, on the one hand, variants which lie in co-hyponymical relationship to the original words: ME *Est* and ME *west* both indicate directions. ME *go*, on the other hand, was replaced by its relational antonym ME *come,* which does not completely change the meaning of the line, just the perspective. In example (17) the meaning of the variant ME *rofeȝ* only refers to a part of the original word and, finally, in examples (18) and (19) we have instances of semantically more or less marked words. ME *parissh prestis* is replaced by ME *vicaries,* which in its early use often referred to "a person acting as priest in a parish in place of the real parson" (*OED*: **vicar**, *n.*), i.e. not just any priest, but a specific one. ME *holden hem*, on the other hand, is replaced by a more general term, ME *leven*. While ME *holde* in this line means "To occupy, be in (a place); also, in stronger sense, To remain in, retain possession or occupation of" (*OED*: **hold**, *v.*), which describes perfectly the way anchorites and hermits lived, this narrow sense has been lost in the example above.

Although Kane explains such alterations as the result of active editing, I find it difficult to determine whether these variants have been introduced consciously or not. In most cases, both the variant and the original word were widely spread at the time the manuscripts were produced and both the original reading and the variant are of Old English origin. It can be argued, therefore, that it is very likely that these variants were introduced due to carelessness in the process of copying, as no simplification of the text is detectable; however, such a claim is always speculative.

There are a few variants that cannot be allocated to any group. These are variants which do not retain the sense of the original word or are not semantically related, but which do not make the line entirely incoherent, either. Examples (20)–(24) provide some examples for such variants:

(21) *Gloside þe gospel as h[e]m good likide;* (Prol. 57)
good] *self* W; *silf* H.

(22) *W*[*hit*] *wyn of osay, & wyn of gascoyne,* (Prol. 107)
Whit] *Good* H.

(23) *Charite & chastite beþ hire chief maidens*, (VI 107)
chief] *clene* E; *tweye* L.

(24) *His sel shulde not be sent to disseyue þe peple* (Prol. 76)
His … peple] *Heo scholde not beo so hardi to deceyue þe peple* V.
þei schulden not be so hardy to bigyle so þe peple H.

(25) *Þat þe pore peple of þe parish shulde haue ȝif þei ne were*. (Prol. 79)
þe (1) *... haue*] *haue schulde þe pore parischens* V.

These examples also include some lines which were entirely or partly substituted. As there is no obvious reason why the scribes altered these words or phrases, I simply present them as examples at the end of my discussion, but I cannot provide any further explanations.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that in some manuscripts alliteration was reduced surprisingly frequently and that some scribes changed words in their copies regardless of the position the words occupied within a line. Almost half of all known manuscripts of the A text have a frequency of lines with reduced alliteration that is higher than 8% (which means that every twelfth line has reduced alliteration) and four manuscripts (HEAM) even feature percentages markedly higher than that (more than 11%). Moreover, the special treatment of two separate parts of the entire text revealed quite diverse figures for some manuscripts, so it is indeed necessary

to analyze different parts of the text, as Benskin and Laing (1981: 62) propose. For the manuscripts HEAM, this did not change the percentages to a great extent, as the percentage for these manuscripts is higher than 10% in both parts. However, the analysis of the different parts showed that in TUDChH^{2}WN alliteration is preserved more carefully in the beginning, but in V it is better preserved in the second part.

In Section 3, I argued that it is very likely that the variants in TDChH^2 were already introduced by the scribe of an ancestor of these manuscripts, as the figures for these manuscripts are comparable in every respect. The corpus of variants gives further support for this claim: in the Prologue and in Passus VI, these manuscripts show the same variants seven times, which is a high number, given that there are only eleven variants from TChH^2 and twelve from D in the Prologue and Passus VI altogether. Therefore, I assume that most of the variants were introduced in a common ancestor of these manuscripts. I admit that this conclusion is somewhat speculative, but the close affinity of these manuscripts and the similarity of their figures cannot be disregarded.

While the reduction of alliteration in the ancestor of TDChH^2 is very likely, there are a few other related manuscripts which often show the same variants. Occasionally, AMH^{3}E or only M and H^3 go together, a few times V and H share the same variant and sometimes the variants of R and U match. On the one hand, this has to be expected as these manuscripts are reported to be related; however, the number of variants they share in alliterative position is so small compared to the total number of variants that I conclude that mainly the individual scribes of these manuscripts were responsible for the reduction of variants. Furthermore, only about half of all variants that reduce alliteration in the genetically related manuscripts R and U are shared, which suggests that the same frequency of such variants, as presented in 3.2, is purely coincidental and that the variants where not already introduced in a common ancestor.

With regard to the reasons for the variants, I discussed three major groups in Section 4: mechanical errors, substitutions for difficult words and semantically related words. While mechanical errors are per definition produced unconsciously, it is often impossible to tell whether other variants were introduced deliberately or not, as only the results are visible but not the cause. Nevertheless, the discussion of variants shows, on the one hand, that variants happen for similar reasons again and again and, on the other hand, that scribes did indeed take an "active interest" (Kane 1988a: 142) when they copied a manuscript and did not spare words in alliterating positions.

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Appendix I – List of manuscripts of the A text based on Kane (1988a: 1–18).

Siglum	Manuscript	Content	Date
A	*Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole 1468*	**A** I 142–XI 313	3rd quarter, 15th century
Ch	*Liverpool, University Library, F.4.8*	**A** Prol.–VIII **A** IX–**C** XVIII **C** XIX–XXI **C** XXII–XXIII	About 1425
D	*Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce 323*	**A** Prol.–XI	Late 15th century
E	*Dublin, Trinity College, D.4.12*	**A** Prol.–VII 44 **A** VII 70–213a	1475–1500
H	*London, British Library, Harley 875*	**A** Prol.–VIII 142 (leaf missing VI 48–VII 2)	1450–1475
H²	*London, British Library, Harley 6041*	**A** Prol.–XI **C** XII 297–XXIII	Not long after 1425
H³	*London, British Library, Harley 3954*	**B** Prol.–V 105 **A** V 106–XI	3rd quarter 15th century
J	*New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M 818*	**A** Prol.–XII 88	Mid-15th century
K	*Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 145*	**A** Prol.–XI **C** XII 297–XXIII	1531–1532
L	*London, Lincoln's Inn, 150*	**A** Prol.–VIII 155	1st quarter 15th century
M	*London, Society of Antiquaries, 687*	**A** Prol.–XI	About 1425
N	*Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, 733B*	**A** I 76–VIII 184 **C** XI–XXII	Early 15th century
R	*Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson Poetry 137*	**A** Prol.–XII	Mid-15th century
T	*Cambridge, Trinity College, R.3.14*	**A** Prol.–XI **C** XII 297–XXIII	About 1400
U	*Oxford, University College, 45*	**A** Prol.–XII 19α	1st quarter 15th century/ 2nd quarter 15th century (two different hands)
V	*Oxford, Bodleian Library, English Poetry a. 1 The "Vernon Manuscript"*	**A** Prol.–XI 183	1380–1400
W	*Eaton Hall, The Duke of Westminster's MS*	**A** Prol.–XI **C** XIII–XXIII	1450–1475